

Testimony
Connecticut General Assembly
Veterans' Affairs Committee

By
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**H.B. 5299 AN ACT CONCERNING THE FINDINGS OF THE MILITARY
OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY TASK FORCE**

**S.B. 212 AN ACT CONCERNING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY TASK
FORCE**

Senator Leone, Representative Hennessy, distinguished Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am pleased to offer this written testimony supporting H.B. 5299 An Act Concerning the Findings of the Military Occupational Specialty Task Force and S.B. 212 An Act Concerning Implementation of the Recommendations of the Military Occupational Specialty Task Force whose shared purpose is to assist veterans and their families gain employment through addressing state licensing barriers. As a veteran with nearly 12 years of service, 10 of which were on active duty as an infantry officer with the United States Marine Corps, I am convinced that these bills are critical first steps to addressing Connecticut's under- and unemployed veterans.

To start my comments, I invite you to envision a young man raising his right hand affirming the oath of enlistment in which he vows to "support and defend the Constitution" (among other things). With that in mind, I believe that in that instance, a "patriotic contract" is formed between the service member and the American people. When a veteran completes his faithful service, whether it be four or twenty years, it is society's turn to help him when and if he needs it.

A myriad of issues, such as PTSD, TBI, and MST, affect military veterans more uniquely than non-veterans because of their military service. The unemployment rate among veterans, particularly younger ones, is staggering and disproportionately high. The following is an excerpt from my student Note to be published by the Connecticut Law Review in a forthcoming issue.¹

In November 2013, the Labor Department reported that the national unemployment rate fell to seven percent, the lowest in five years;² however,

¹ Rosendo Garza Jr., *"In War, There Are No Unwounded Soldiers": Mobilizing Connecticut to Implement a Veterans Treatment Court*, 46 CONN. L. REV. (forthcoming July 2014).

² Bill Chappell, *Eyes Turn to the Fed as Unemployment Rate Falls to 5-Year Low*, NAT'L PUB. RADIO (Dec 6, 2013, 8:40 AM), <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/12/06/249224096/203k-jobs-added-in-november-u-s-unemployment-at-7-percent> (last updated Dec. 6, 2013, 10:15 AM).

unemployment rate for Gulf War II veterans sits at ten percent.³ Even more shocking is that as of August 2013, the Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training Services of the U.S. Department of Labor reported that the unemployment rate for veterans aged 18–24 is “a staggering 20.5%.”⁴

These statistics are ominous when one considers that an unemployed person is “twice as likely as their employed counterparts to experience psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, low subjective well-being and poor self-esteem.”⁵ Thus, unemployment, especially when taking into account issues such as PTSD, TBI, or MST, can compound the problems a veteran faces in civilian life. Though some progress has been made at the state level to lower the veteran unemployment rate, much is yet to be accomplished.

These bills are good first steps to helping resolve redundancies and inefficiencies in the licensing system. Please do not misconstrue my comments; Connecticut is very generous to its veterans but we can always do more. Recent reports, for example, stating that the Department of Defense budget cuts will result in a U.S. Army the size of pre-World War II levels⁶ lends credence to the argument that Connecticut must do more to address the veteran unemployment rate. A smaller force, invariably, results in more veterans coming home and in need of education or employment.

I would like to share a personal story. A Marine who served under my command left active duty right before the recession—he will remain anonymous for obvious reasons. Life for him afterwards was very difficult because he did not fit in college and, once he left to seek employment, he struggled to find one. His undiagnosed PTSD compounded by his inability to find employment exacerbated the challenges that, quite frankly, we all face in one form or another, i.e., raising a family, marriage, paying the rent or mortgage. As a veteran, his life challenges were intensified by an inability to find employment. Drawing from personal and other's experiences, while harder to demonstrate, veterans contend with social stigma, especially when trying to find a job in the civilian world.⁷ In the end, life in the civilian world became too much and, as luck would have it, he was allowed to re-enlist in the Corps.

³ Brad Plummer, *The Unemployment Rate for Recent Veterans is Incredibly High*, WASH. POST (Nov. 11, 2013, 11:30 AM), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/11/11/recent-veterans-are-still-experiencing-double-digit-unemployment/>. So as to not confuse the reader, Gulf War II veterans are those that have served post-9/11.

⁴ Assistant Secretary for Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Keith Kelly, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR (Aug. 1, 2013), available at http://www.dol.gov/_sec/media/congress/20130801_Kelly.htm (remarks at the National Convention for AMVETS).

⁵ *Psychological Effects of Unemployment and Underemployment*, AM. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASS'N, <https://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/socioeconomic/unemployment.aspx>.

⁶ David Alexander & Andrea Shala, *Budget Cuts to Slash U.S. Army to Smallest Since Before World War Two*, REUTERS (Feb. 24, 2014, 3:05 PM), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/24/us-usa-defense-budget-idUSBREA1N1IO20140224>.

⁷ See MARGARET C. HARRELL & NANCY BERGLASS, CTR. FOR A NEW AM. SEC. EMPLOYING AMERICA'S VETERANS: PERSPECTIVES FROM BUSINESSES 23 fig.4, 26 (2012), available at http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_EmployingAmericasVeterans_HarrellBerglass.pdf (discussing that more than 50 percent of surveyed companies harbored negative perceptions of veterans).

While most veterans will transition relatively well, some will not. PTSD, TBI, and MST may and does plague many veterans. Sophisticated analytics are not required to in making the reasonable suggestion that without a way to make ends meet, a veteran already struggling with other demons (read PTSD, TBI, and MST) will have a much more difficult time functioning in and adjusting to civilian life. Both newspaper reports and autobiographies are replete with accounts of how arduous it can be to transition out of the military.⁸

Helping those who faithfully served their nation, I believe, requires us as an American society, as members of this community, to facilitate their path towards meaningful work and educational opportunities. And this feeling also extends to spouses, who are heroes in their own right. Spouses who are nurses or teachers, for example, must relocate often and have difficulty applying their credentials in a new state. Oftentimes they become *de facto* single parents and are faced with taking care of the children and the home when service members are called to defend their country.

In closing, I urge this legislative body to adopt the proposed bills as a first step towards eliminating redundancies and inefficiencies in the licensing schemes. However, I also ask that the legislature implement more comprehensive and robust legislative changes akin to Illinois and Maryland's initiatives. By doing so, Connecticut will be taking an affirmative step in fulfilling its "patriotic contract" with its veterans. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rosendo Garza Jr.', with a stylized, cursive script.

Rosendo Garza Jr.

⁸ For a fantastic resource on the transitioning, see *Transitioning from Service*, MAKE THE CONNECTION, <https://maketheconnection.net/events/transitioning-from-service>. This website is part of a "public awareness campaign by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that provides personal testimonials and resources to help Veterans discover ways to improve their lives." *About Make the Connection*, MAKE THE CONNECTION, <http://maketheconnection.net/about/>.